

The Oswald Review: An International Journal of Undergraduate Research and Criticism in the Discipline of English

Volume 21 | Issue 1


Article 6

2019

When Life Imitates Art: Aestheticism in The Importance of Being Earnest

Drake DeOrnellis
Liberty University, VA

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarcommons.sc.edu/tor>

 Part of the [American Literature Commons](#), [Comparative Literature Commons](#), [Literature in English, Anglophone outside British Isles and North America Commons](#), [Literature in English, British Isles Commons](#), and the [Literature in English, North America Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

DeOrnellis, Drake (2019) "When Life Imitates Art: Aestheticism in The Importance of Being Earnest," *The Oswald Review: An International Journal of Undergraduate Research and Criticism in the Discipline of English*: Vol. 21 : Iss. 1 , Article 6.
Available at: <https://scholarcommons.sc.edu/tor/vol21/iss1/6>

This Article is brought to you by the College of Humanities and Social Sciences at Scholar Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in The Oswald Review: An International Journal of Undergraduate Research and Criticism in the Discipline of English by an authorized editor of Scholar Commons. For more information, please contact dillarda@mailbox.sc.edu.

When Life Imitates Art: Aestheticism in *The Importance of Being Earnest*

Keywords

The Importance of Being Earnest, aestheticism, Oscar Wilde

When Life Imitates Art: Aestheticism in *The Importance of Being Earnest*

Drake DeOrnellis

“**T**He truth is rarely pure and never simple. Modern life would be very tedious if it were either, and modern literature a complete impossibility!”

(*Importance* 828). With this declaration, Oscar Wilde’s sensational character Algernon unknowingly highlights a central concern not only of his age but of all who love art and literature: the relationship of truth and beauty in art. Writing late in the Victorian Age, Wilde stood at the head of the controversial aesthetic movement, which challenged those arguing that art should prioritize truth by imitating life and should teach its readers morality. Instead, aesthetes affirmed art’s intrinsic value and measured art’s success not by its truthfulness but by its beauty—understood by aesthetes like Wilde and Walter Pater as “something immediately experienced, felt upon the pulses—not a bloodless abstraction ... [it was] a blanket term covering the impressions we receive and enjoy” (Johnson 3). Wilde pushed the aesthetic agenda still further: like art, good criticism should not seek to record an artistic object’s true nature but should record the viewer’s impressions of the work, regardless of accuracy, and life itself should imitate and become a beautiful work of art, even if this beauty is a lie. Unsurprisingly, Wilde’s convictions about the nature of art and criticism manifest themselves in his literary works, especially through his characters’ lifestyles in *The Importance of Being Earnest*, though close analysis of the play reveals a dimension of beauty that

Wilde fails to articulate in his own theorizing. Through their creation and interpretation of fictional identities, Jack, Algernon, Gwendolen, and Cecily become Wildean aesthetic artists and critics, ultimately nuancing Wilde's theory by representing truth as a criterion for beauty.

To begin, Jack Worthing, the main character of *The Importance of Being Earnest*, applies Wilde's aesthetic theories by using several fictional identities for himself, thus transforming his life into a work of art. As Alexandra Poulain argues, throughout the play writing becomes a tool to recreate Jack's identity. When Mr. Cardew discovered Jack abandoned in a handbag with no clues regarding Jack's true identity, Mr. Cardew decided to "construct" a fictional identity for Jack by naming him and later making "him Cecily's guardian in his will, literally creating the 'serious' Jack of the country" (297). Jack's identity in this way resembles a work of literature, for it is both fictional and came into existence through writing. Interestingly, understanding Jack as living literature corresponds well with Wilde's thoughts on art and life, for Wilde argued in "The Decay of Lying" that "Life imitates Art far more than Art imitates Life" (320). Joseph McQueen explains Wilde's point by saying, "[L]ife and nature reach out beyond themselves in order to find intelligibility through art" (868). Art, and particularly literature, offers a series of experiences that are unified and coherent, something life is not on its own. This experience of coherence brings pleasure to the viewer, and just as art offers this pleasure that the aesthetes associated with beauty, so also should life, according to Wilde. Similarly, developing a fictional identity for himself and, in a sense, becoming a work of literature allows Jack to find this intelligibility that art possesses, for his new identity

is better able to clarify and to unify Jack's experiences and sense of self than the sad reality that he was abandoned and has no knowledge of his origins. Thus, Jack's life imitates and even becomes a work of art.

Jack goes beyond creating one fictional identity for himself, however, and creates a fictional brother, Ernest, who further demonstrates Jack's adherence to Wilde's aesthetic understanding of life and literature. Jack pretends to be Ernest when he arrives in town, providing him with an escape from the responsibilities of Jack Worthing. Jack literally writes this identity into existence with the visiting cards marked "Ernest Worthing" that Algernon discusses in the first act of the play. Again, Jack's life imitates art, for, like an author, he writes himself a fictional identity that then allows him to pursue the exciting life he cannot have in his day-to-day life as Jack Worthing. For Jack, taking on the role of author and writing his own identities for himself provides him with a "beautiful" life that the realities of life cannot deliver. Nevertheless, this fictional identity is false, demonstrating that in order to achieve the life he wants, Jack, like an aesthete, must prioritize beauty over truth. Thus, Jack exemplifies Wilde's thesis that life should imitate art, and that art should be beautiful rather than truthful, by creating an intelligible and exciting life for himself through fictional identities.

Like Jack, Algernon also creates fictional identities for himself and in this way applies Wilde's theories about literature to his own life. Algernon has three identities: his real identity of Algernon, the invalid Bunbury whom Algernon uses as an excuse to escape social engagements, and Jack's wicked younger brother Ernest, the persona Algernon adopts in order to meet and win the heart of Cecily. Both fictional characters clearly resem-

ble art more than reality. Algernon's supposed self-sacrificial tending to his invalid friend confers on Algernon's character an air of nobility and kindness that does not often exist in real life, and Bunbury's habit of always falling ill at the most convenient times for Algernon seems unlikely in everyday life but more probable in the realm of literature. Algernon's character Ernest, meanwhile, closely parallels the anti-heroes of Romantic literature, wicked men who nevertheless fall in love with beautiful women and as a result change their ways. In this way Algernon writes his own story, and these stories mirror the romance and coincidence of art and literature far more than the occurrences of daily life, while also allowing Algernon to pursue the pleasures not permitted to him by the social customs of the day. Algernon certainly puts Wilde's maxim into practice in his own life through his shameless employment of fictional identities.

While the men of the play adopt fictional identities for themselves and thus create works of literature out of their lives, Gwendolen and Cecily become Wildean critics of these "texts," preferring their own impressions over reality and creating their own works of art based on the works they critique. Wilde articulates this vision for what aesthetic literary criticism should look like in *The Critic as Artist*, in which he argues that "the highest criticism really is . . . the record of one's own soul," further adding, "His sole aim is to chronicle his own impressions" and "Who cares whether Mr. Ruskin's views on Turner are sound or not? What does it matter?" (817-818). For Wilde, criticism should not and cannot attempt to dissect a work in order to understand the one true meaning it communicates. Instead of seeking some sort of truth, the critic should share his own understanding

of the beauty of the work. Gwendolen, in her interpretation of the fictional “text” of Jack, follows Wilde’s advice. The “Ernest Worthing” that Gwendolen falls in love with is, in effect, a fiction rather than a true person, and so Gwendolen’s interpretation of this character parallels the role of a literary critic. Interestingly, however, Gwendolen does not wait to interpret Jack until meeting him but rather develops her opinion of him beforehand: “The moment Algernon first mentioned to me that he had a friend called Ernest, I knew I was destined to love you” (*Importance* 831-832). At this point Gwendolen has had no interactions with “Ernest” and therefore has no evidence that her romantic impressions of him are true. Nevertheless, Gwendolen does not care about the validity of her interpretation of “Ernest” but rather indulges her own romantic impressions of him regardless of their truth. In this way Gwendolen acts as the ideal Wildean critic by interpreting Jack according to her own impressions and desires rather than some standard of reality.

Not only does Wilde recommend that critics record their own impressions of beautiful artwork, but also that critics craft new works of beauty out of these works of art, another way in which Gwendolen conforms to Wilde’s vision of criticism. In *The Critic as Artist*, Wilde argues that “[the highest criticism] treats the work of art simply as a starting point for a new creation” (819). Criticism goes beyond recording one’s reactions and thus becomes a new form of art, as the critic takes a previous work and then creates more art out of it. Gwendolen’s romance with Jack certainly accomplishes this task. Sarah Balkin argues that Gwendolen “inhabits [an] author-narrator role,” for she has in effect invented her own romance, falling in

love with Jack simply based on his name rather than allowing the romance to develop naturally (37). This decision to love Jack then informs all their subsequent interactions when they do meet in person, making it impossible for a flirtation and then a romance not to form. Balkin further elaborates that, “By narrating fictional accounts of [her] own [life], Gwendolen ... anticipate[s] and shape[s] [that life] and, in conjunction with the other characters, the action of the play” (37). Like Wilde’s ideal critic, Gwendolen builds on an artwork and creates a more beautiful work out of it—in this case, her romance with Ernest, which shapes not only her life but the lives of the other characters in the play. Thus, Gwendolen provides another example of how the characters of *The Importance of Being Earnest* practice aesthetic theory in the context of their everyday life.

Cecily perhaps even more closely conforms to Wilde’s ideal of an aesthetic critic than does Gwendolen, as demonstrated by her lavish indulgence of her romantic impressions as she interprets Algernon’s fictional “Ernest.” Cecily develops an immense interest in Jack’s wicked “brother” Ernest, and though she has never met him, she falls in love with the person she imagines him to be and then, even more ridiculously, pretends to be engaged to him. By doing so, Cecily acts as a Wildean critic, interpreting the fictional Ernest based on her own whimsical impressions rather than on any sort of reality. Furthermore, she develops only positive impressions of Ernest, despite the understandable possibility of interpreting him negatively, another aspect of Wilde’s philosophy of criticism. In his preface to *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, Wilde states, “Those who find ugly meanings in beautiful things are corrupt without being charming. This is a fault. Those

who find beautiful meanings in beautiful things are the cultivated. For these there is hope. They are the elect to whom beautiful things mean only beauty" (822). Not only should critics record their own impressions, but a good critic will recognize the beauty inherent in a work and will allow it to produce not ugly but only beautiful impressions within him. Interestingly, Wilde does not concern himself with finding true meanings in art, because he does not believe truth matters in art. Instead, there is only beauty or ugliness. Cecily indeed is one of the "elect" that Wilde mentions, for not only is Ernest a piece of art in that he is entirely a work of fiction, but she reads into this text not the ugly meaning of a wicked man that many would read into it, but rather finds the "beautiful meaning" of an interesting, complex man for her to love and reform. Thus, Cecily proves to be the ideal Wildean critic by finding only the beauty rather than the ugly in Algernon's work of art and basing her interpretation around these impressions of beauty.

Like Gwendolen, Cecily not only ignores the truth by choosing to interpret her lover based on her own impressions and desires, but she also creates more art out of her interpretation, particularly demonstrated in her pretend engagement to Algernon. In keeping up the illusion of this make-believe relationship, Cecily even goes so far as to write letters from "Ernest" to herself and to buy herself a ring and bangle on behalf of "Ernest" (*Importance* 849). She also records in her journal the significant events of her engagement, including when she broke off the engagement for a week. Commenting further on these journal entries, Poulain argues that Cecily, like Jack, uses writing to create a new reality: "[T]he letters she writes to herself on behalf of 'Ernest' are fabrications which supplement his absence

and create a whole pathological being out of paper and ink” (295). In fact, she has created such a clear character for this Ernest that, “when Algy finally appears at the Manor House, he has only to impersonate the emotional character which she has created in writing” (295). Much like the critic who takes up his pen to create new art based on the art he interprets, Cecily uses writing to add new life to the fictional “Ernest.” The world she creates mirrors the plot of a romance novel, complete with wicked men who reform themselves out of love and the drama of broken and renewed engagements. Cecily, like the other characters, finds the world of art far more beautiful and compelling than the real world, and so as a critic she not only embraces the beauty of the fictional Ernest but continues to develop it. Furthermore, she knows that her fictional romance is false, but for her it does not matter whether it is true or false as long as its beauty brings her pleasure. Thus, Cecily joins the other characters in creating a work of art out of her life.

However, though Gwendolen and Cecily at first willingly comply with Wilde’s vision for literary critics, after discovering the truth about Jack and Algernon, their relationship to Wilde’s aesthetic criticism becomes more complicated. When the girls believe that Jack and Algernon’s “art” corresponds to reality, Gwendolen and Cecily remain delighted with their lovers and find “beautiful meanings” in this art, following Wilde’s recommendation for critics in his preface to *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (822). And even when they realize the men have lied to them, they are still willing to find “beautiful meanings” in their words, even if their words do not actually correspond to reality but are a fiction, an art. When Algernon explains to Cecily that he lied about being Ernest so that he could meet her, Cecily

says to Gwendolen, “That certainly seems a satisfactory explanation, does it not?” (*Importance* 858). Gwendolen questions whether Cecily can believe Algernon, to which Cecily answers, “I don’t. But that does not affect the wonderful beauty of his answer” and Gwendolen replies, “True. In matters of grave importance, style, not sincerity is the vital thing” (858). Timothy Peltason analyzes this passage and connects the girls’ focus on style to “the central themes of Wilde’s criticism,” that is, the critic’s duty is not to explain the object as it really is but to build on the work and create a greater work of art (130-133). In other words, Cecily is satisfied with Algernon’s response, not because of its truthfulness, but because of the beauty she finds in it, and so she does not delve deeper into the true meaning behind his words but rather gladly accepts her own beautiful understanding of the situation. Gwendolen furthermore encourages this value of beauty over truth in her words. At first, then, Cecily and Gwendolen continue to abide by Wilde’s ideals for aesthetic criticism.

Nevertheless, though the girls are willing to read beautiful meanings into the “art” of the men without regard to truth, there is one point on which the girls will not move: the name of Ernest. After the girls whisper together about whether to forgive the men, they return to Jack and Algernon with the reply, “Your Christian names are still an insuperable barrier. That is all!” (*Importance* 858). The artistic stories that Gwendolen and Cecily have each devised in their own imaginations in response to Jack and Algernon hold such a grip on them that they refuse to sacrifice their ideals. The girls have followed Wilde’s theory of criticism and have created their own artwork in response to the men’s art, but when faced with the truth

that the men's lives are indeed art, are "Life imitat[ing] Art," and that their own criticism is thus art as well, they seem to reject Wilde's theory. Now reality must conform to their art, which means that Jack and Algernon's art must become reality as well. Only when Jack and Algernon declare "But we are going to be christened this afternoon" (858), thus transforming their fictional identities into realities, do the girls forgive the men and accept them as fiancés once more. It is one thing to admire art when it is meant to be art, but for the girls of *The Importance of Being Earnest*, if life is to imitate art, this art must nevertheless become a reality.

If *The Importance of Being Earnest* is a test case for Wilde's literary theory, then Gwendolen and Cecily's complicated relationship with their roles as critics implies that beauty and truth both have an essential role in interpretation, a claim that supersedes Wilde's aesthetic criticism. Wilde's play allows him to explore the implications of characters living as works of art and as critics of others' art. However, at least in *The Importance of Being Earnest*, the dichotomy Wilde sets up between truth and beauty breaks down, with the two concepts becoming one and the same. Wilde criticizes art that attempts to be "true" to life, but Gwendolen and Cecily's refusal to accept Jack and Algernon indicates that they do not find the falsity of the "Ernest" story beautiful. Instead, this story is only beautiful if it is also true. Of course, the actual truth is not beautiful to them—it is not a "beautiful" work of art that Jack is named Jack or that Algernon is named Algernon—but beauty cannot be beautiful unless it is true. Wilde's test-case

demonstrates that his aesthetic literary criticism only goes so far. While art is beautiful, irrespective of its truth, and life seems more beautiful when it imitates art in this way, at some point truth becomes as valuable as beauty and even becomes part of beauty, a nuance Wilde does not draw out in his theorizing.

Wilde experiments with his detailed aesthetic literary theory in *The Importance of Being Earnest*. Arguing that art's purpose is not to tell the truth but to be beautiful, that life should imitate the beauty of art, and that criticism should create a new work of art out of the critic's impressions, Wilde populates his play with characters who practice this philosophy in the fictional lives they have created for themselves. However, while Cecily and Gwendolen at first adhere to Wilde's aesthetic standard for criticism, eventually truth becomes a criterion for beauty for the girls, demonstrated by their initial rejection of Algernon and Jack. Wilde may dismiss the importance of truth in art, but when his theory is applied to lives rather than art, truth becomes a necessity. Thus, Wilde's theory proves limited—in the end, his characters find some form of beauty in truth that makes truth necessary even in works of art. Of course, the characters in Wilde's play who draw out this point are, in themselves, art, and beyond that, potential objects of satire. Perhaps, after all, the relationship between truth and beauty expressed in *The Importance of Being Earnest* functions in the play merely to make the play beautiful, and funny. Yet however one chooses to interpret the play, Wilde's characters in *The Importance of Being Earnest* embody Wilde's aestheticism and provoke serious thought on the meaning of beauty and truth.

Works Cited

- Balkin, Sarah. "Realizing Personality in *The Importance of Being Earnest*." *Modern Drama*, vol. 59 no. 1, 2016, pp. 26-48. *Project MUSE*. Accessed 23 Nov. 2018.
- Johnson, R. V. *Aestheticism*. First edition. Taylor and Francis, 2018. Print.
- McQueen, Joseph. "Oscar Wilde's Catholic Aesthetics in a Secular Age." *Studies in English Literature, 1500-1900*, vol. 57, no. 4, 2017, p. 865-886. *Academic OneFile*. Accessed 24 Nov. 2018.
- Peltason, Timothy. "Oscar in Earnest." *Raritan* 35.1 (2015): 114-156. *ProQuest*. Accessed 23 Nov. 2018.
- Poulain, Alexandra. "False Impressions': Writing in *The Importance of Being Earnest*." *Études Anglaises* 67.3 (2014): 290-301. *ProQuest*. Accessed 23. Nov. 2018.
- Wilde, Oscar. "The Critic as Artist." *The Norton Anthology of English Literature: The Victorian Age*, edited by Stephen Greenblatt, W. W. Norton & Company, 2018, pp. 813-822.
- . "The Decay of Lying." *The Artist as Critic: Critical Writings of Oscar Wilde*, edited by Richard Ellman, Random House, 1969, pp. 290-320.
- . *The Importance of Being Earnest. The Norton Anthology of English Literature: The Victorian Age*, edited by Stephen Greenblatt, W. W. Norton & Company, 2018, pp. 824-867.
- . "Preface to *The Picture of Dorian Gray*." *The Norton Anthology of English Literature: The Victorian Age*, edited by Stephen Greenblatt, W. W. Norton & Company, 2018, pp. 822-823.